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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1069  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 0062  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1151

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000080

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU  
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/17/2019  
TAGS: PREL PREF MOPS BM TH  
SUBJECT: FIGHTING WANING; DISPLACES 4,000

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 76 (JUNTA-LED OFFENSIVE)  
1B. CHIANG MAI 61 (KNU ON PEACE TALKS)

CHIANG MAI 00000080 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary and Comment  
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11. (C) As fighting between the anti-Burmese regime Karen National Union (KNU) and combined forces of its rival Karen Democratic Buddhist Army (DKBA) and Burma Army wanes, the humanitarian consequences are becoming clearer. Approximately 4,000 displaced persons have fled into Thailand, and are in need of medicines (including for Malaria) and latrines. Meanwhile, the KNU is changing its battle tactics, resorting now to guerrilla warfare with only small numbers of soldiers manning its bases in the affected area.

12. (C) Comment: This movement of displaced persons meets the Thai definition of those it is willing to accept -- fleeing active fighting -- and Thai authorities have responded quickly to set up temporary shelters, with NGOs already providing some support services. Since conditions inside Burma are not likely to allow a safe return in the near future, however, Thai authorities will be faced with a dilemma, including whether to move them to existing camps in other provinces or establish a new one. Embassy Bangkok will be engaging RTG officials on their evolving thinking. End Summary and Comment.

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Fighting on the Decline; IDPs on the Rise  
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13. (C) According to NGO, Thai National Intelligence (NIA), and KNU contacts, the fighting that broke out earlier this month between the KNU, DKBA, and Burma Army has lessened significantly over the past few days. The KNU told us it is down to small skirmishes, and NIA contacts opined it would die down entirely in the next few days. According to NGOs assisting the IDPs and to the KNU, the number of affected Karen who have fled into Thailand has risen to 4,000, up approximately 25% from estimates earlier this week.

14. (C) According to NGO workers assisting the IDPs, they are scattered in seven make-shift sites on the Thai side of the border. Medicines initially supplied by the Thai Ministry of

Public Health (MOPH) have run out, and more latrines need to be dug. Among the affected population, 60 have Malaria, for which they need treatment soon. Thai authorities are granting access to NGOs, who are providing assistance in a coordinated manner. Though the Royal Thai Army (RTA) is in overall control, officials from the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which oversees the refugee camps, and MOPH are also present. Thai authorities have said little about prospects for the group to remain in Thailand, though we note that refugee camps in Tak Province (where the IDPs entered Thailand) are already crowded. Moving 4,000 IDPs to less crowded facilities in other provinces would be a tremendous logistical undertaking, and is a prospect for which the RTG has demonstrated little appetite.

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No Offensive Imminent, but...  
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¶ 15. (C) According to a KNU contact who just returned to Thailand from the affected area, the KNU is no longer trying to maintain a sizable military presence at its bases, opting instead to man them with very small numbers of troops. These soldiers are responding to the shelling and heavy weaponry being employed by the Burmese regime and DKBA with guerrilla tactics, ambushing small units and quickly retreating. According to the contact, these tactics have proven effective. Thai National Intelligence Agency (NIA) contacts told us that KNU ranks have suffered one fatality and 10 injuries, while the corresponding figures for the DKBA are 17 and 59. Our KNU contact also alleged that many DKBA and regime soldiers are consuming large amounts of alcohol and methamphetamines, leading them to blindly follow orders, even if they are physically unaware of exactly what they are doing. The regime-DKBA offensive is designed to pressure the KNU to the negotiating table, he opined, noting that the KNU is still awaiting a response from the Burmese regime to the very few conditions it placed on resuming talks (Ref B).

CHIANG MAI 00000080 002.2 OF 002

¶ 16. (C) As the KNU reduces its military presence in the affected area, it will become more and more difficult for IDPs to return safely. According to the NIA, the KNU's tactics have effectively led to its relinquishing military control over the swath of Burmese territory across from Tak Province, leaving the KNU with control over areas across from Mae Hong Son Province only. The area across from Tak is strategically important, and the landmines laid down by the KNU around its Seventh Brigade and 202nd Battalion bases have prevented the DKBA and SPDC forces from overrunning them entirely.

¶ 17. (C) Both RTA and NIA contacts told us on June 18 they see no indication whatsoever that a new offensive will begin in the next few days. They did confirm that the Burma Army (BA) has ordered the DKBA to "wipe out" the KNU in the area. The DKBA/BA tactic is to use heavy weaponry to clear the mines protecting the KNU's bases to pave the way for ground troops to move in. They opined that the KNU will vacate military positions if necessary, ceding them to the DKBA until BA troops withdraw and the KNU can retake them. The KNU successfully utilized this maneuver earlier in the year, retaking its 201st Battalion post that had previously been occupied by the DKBA. Nonetheless, both the RTA and NIA contacts opined that small-scale military actions would continue until the DKBA achieves the BA's goal of eliminating the KNU's resistance in the area.

¶ 18. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon.

MOORE  
ANDERSON